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ABSTRACT

To give teachers help in understanding themselves better and in relating more positively to their students, small discussion groups were organized to provide maximum opportunities for teachers to express thoughts and feelings about themselves and about problems they were facing in the classroom that prevented them from relating positively to their students. Through group dynamics, the teachers gained support from each other as they helped each other problem-solve. A comparison of the pre-test and post-test scores on the Minnesota Teachers Attitude Inventory revealed significantly changed scores in a positive direction for teachers who participated in this learning experience. (Author)

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Improving Teacher-Student Relationships Through Small Discussion Groups

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I. Why Organize Discussion Groups for Teachers?

Few will disagree that some constructive input is needed to help teachers who so many experts state are the single, most important factor in a school. Teachers need help. There was ample evidence from Kohl (1967), Kozol (1967), Fuchs (1969), and Silverman (1970), that teachers and school systems were damaging children. Experts offering the kinds of help teachers need are not abundant. Berlin (1958) found that schools of education seemed to pay little attention to the difficulties, strains, and burdens of classroom teaching. Professors emphasized the elements of good discipline in a classroom; but rarely, if ever, did they talk about the feelings of the teacher who was confronted with problems in discipline. It appeared that we could no longer ignore Greenwood's (1968) statement that "the educational degree can not and does not miraculously convert a non-teacher into a teacher." We cannot afford to gamble on the hope that the teacher will grow up, will learn to cope with situations, and will emerge as a good teacher in the end. In a haphazard fashion some make the grade and others do not. The question we then asked ourselves was, "If teachers were provided with an opportunity to sit down in a group and air and share their classroom problems, could their attitudes toward themselves and their students be deliberately improved?"

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II. The Purpose of Discussion Groups

Small discussion groups have been organized for teachers who voluntarily attend in order to gain a greater understanding of their own behavior so that they can recognize how teachers' behavior affects students' behavior. They meet as a work group to describe and analyze classroom problems, to define possible alternative solutions to these problems, and to evaluate these solutions as they are applied in the classroom. The course is officially titled "Group Discussion To Help Teachers Better Understand Themselves and Their Students." It is described as follows: The group discussions will provide an opportunity for teachers to air and share the problems in the classroom with others in the group. The sessions will be aimed at helping group members gain increased awareness of student behavior. Through group dynamics, teachers can gain support from each other as those in the group bring up and discuss problems they have encountered in the classroom.

III. Methodology Used

The fundamental method for achieving the goals of the study group was acquired through introducing reinforcement learning theories based on Skinner's (1963) and Dreikurs' (1950) work. The explicit goal was to encourage teachers to adopt a positive approach to teaching their students and, further, to learn to ignore negative behavior and instead to respond positively to appropriate behavior. The key to effecting actual changes in teachers' behavior seems to lie in the group discussions. Teachers gained admission to the group by voluntarily attending. By their attendance they admitted

that they had recognized deficiencies in dealing with problems in the classroom. The defect which the teacher admitted and recognized immediately became an asset. The teachers who in the past might have been ashamed of their shortcomings and deficiencies found themselves accepted by others on the strength of those traits which might have been a source of embarrassment.

A democratic social climate was created by the leader in that each teacher had the status of an equal participant and the leader served as a resource person. This environment provided maximum opportunities for teachers to express thoughts and feelings about classroom problems which the teachers determine as relevant. The contents of the group discussions were kept confidential and not discussed outside the group without the teachers' explicit permission.

Through two-hour group discussions, over a period of generally fifteen weeks, solutions to problems emerged. The first phase of discussions (first to fourth week) were generally devoted to teachers learning to trust each other so that difficulties with children were revealed. The second phase of discussions (fifth to tenth week), the emphasis shifted to problem solving and the third phase (eleventh to fifteenth week) the teachers shared their successes and failures, and reported on changes within themselves and their students.

During the first few sessions, teachers were given the Minnesota Teachers Attitude inventory, saw a film on reinforcement learning theory and were given a bibliography of unassigned readings. Some typical classroom problems that were raised during the early discussions follow:

Mary: "I sent Larry to the principal's office and the principal sent him back to me with another boy who said, 'The principal doesn't want to see his face.' Well, I didn't want to see his face either. He was disturbing the whole class."

Peter: "I get annoyed when kids don't learn. I find that when I say, 'Shut up or I'll break your neck,' it works. No child is getting the best of me. Positive reinforcement takes a long time to work. I don't want to wait until June to have a perfect day. I want a perfect day in September."

Linda: "Kids ought to be learning in my class because they want to learn. If I reward their learning I'll be promoting a materialistic society. From the time my students are little if they get rewards they'll always be expecting them. Just because rewards might work is that the best way to do things?"

Glenda: "I don't know what to do to handle this boy. How can I keep him in his seat and keep him from hurting other people? I'm not supposed to touch him but he sticks pins in people and hurts them. Today a little girl knocked a paste jar off his desk and he pinched her real hard. I don't know what to do with him."

During the closing sessions, some sample solutions to problems were presented as follows:

Mary: "The problem with Larry has been mostly due to me. I moved him closer to me. I'm giving him rewards and it's amazing how it's working. When I first got him in my room every teacher told me that it was a lost cause. Now he's getting his work done. He's coming along beautifully. It has been my fault and every other teacher's fault in this school. All he needed was a little extra effort on my part."

Peter: "I'm using time between periods for socializing. It's a good break for the kids. I'm using older kids to tutor my slower kids and it's working real well. My kids are starting to come around. I don't know if they are coming around or if I'm coming around."

Linda: "My class has worked out so much better this week because I don't have to stop to say, 'Stop that! Sit still!' I was rewarding the people that were doing things right--the others eventually fell into line. I wasn't nearly as tired this week."

Glenda: "But one thing I still have trouble with is trying to ignore the child who disrupts. Using praise does work but I keep slipping back and forget and then I start to holler. I feel happier in the classroom when I'm using praise. I feel like an old grouch when I start to holler. It's so hard to change."

IV. Findings

Many methods were used to recruit teacher volunteers. On one occasion, teachers were sent letters of invitation; on another, principals were sent notices to post on their school bulletin boards. One school principal asked a group leader to conduct a seminar in his school for his entire faculty. Half of them attended after school hours, together with the principal and the school social worker. Bulletin notices advertising the seminar, along with other in-service training courses by the Pittsburgh Board of Education and the Pittsburgh Catholic Diocese Schools, were among the most successful methods of recruiting teachers.

University or college undergraduate or graduate school credits proved to be an important incentive for teachers to attend. In the past, the University of Pittsburgh's Elementary Education Department of the School of Education offered two graduate credits to teacher participants. Currently, teachers who attend can receive undergraduate credit from Carlow College's Education Department and undergraduate or graduate credit from Pennsylvania State University's Continuing Education Department, or salary increment credit from the Pittsburgh Board of Public Education. A suburban school district paid teachers $5.00 an hour for attending twelve two-hour sessions on Saturday mornings.

The scores on the Minnesota Teachers Attitude Inventory (Cook, Leeds, Callis 1951) significantly improved for all teachers' groups. A low score on this instrument (a score of 36 fell in the 25th precentile) indicated a teacher who was authoritarian, lacked rapport with students and was socially insecure. A high score (a score of 82 fell in the 75th precentile) indicated a teacher who was democratic established good rapport with students and was socially secure. It has been found that group mean scores have significantly improved in a favorable direction after the teachers met in discussion groups. (Ruben, 1969).

V. Conclusion

No one will dispute that the life of the teacher is a most challenging one. If the group discussions helped teachers to relate more positively to their students and to see themselves as more worthwhile human beings, then our goals were achieved.

If schools of education take on the challenge of providing this kind of experience to their undergraduates in training, and if school systems will provide this kind of experience to their new teachers as well as to their experienced teachers and administrators, it seems clear that a big step would have been taken toward helping teachers and administrators do the kinds of jobs they would ideally like to do. Schools would then become a more rewarding place for teachers to teach and for children to learn. But until that day comes, there seems ample evidence that teachers appreciate the support, reassurance and learning that the group experiences provide.

Most teachers who have experienced meeting in these groups are still actively engaged in classroom teaching. Hopefully, they and their students will continue to benefit from this modest effort.

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